

Accelerating Multi-Domain Operations: Evolution of an Idea

by GEN Stephen Townsend

Multi-domain battle (MDB) has a clear origin. Stemming from the idea that disruptive technologies will change the character of warfare, it recognizes that the way armies will fight and win wars will also change. It also reflects the desire to replicate the success of AirLand Battle, which is arguably the most significant case of developing a concept and then materializing capabilities across the doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership education, personnel and facilities spectrum.

Origin stories establish the foundation from which lasting ideas emerge. However, for ideas to have a lasting impact, they must evolve. For MDB, there are two things driving the need to evolve the concept.

First, ideas must evolve to ensure alignment with the strategic direction of the enterprise they serve. The 2018 National Defense Strategy lays out the missions, emerging operational environments, advances in technology and anticipated enemy, threat and adversary capabilities the Department of Defense envisions for the foreseeable future. It provides direction for how the joint force must evolve to compete, deter and win in future armed conflict. To this end, MDB must reflect this strategy.

Second, when I took the reins of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, I was specifically directed to “operationalize multi-domain battle” by building upon the foundation created by my predecessor and accelerating its application. And what I found was an incredible foundation. GEN Dave Perkins brought together partners across the joint force, driving development of the concept to an articulated idea and a vision of how the Army fits into it. The key players are all here and are committed to building and improving the concept and finding real solutions. The concept is ready to grow.

But for that to happen, we need to confront some of the problems others have noted. Over the last 18 months MDB has been out there for debate, there have been four consistent critiques. Some noted that the idea was “old wine in a new bottle.” I think the iPhone analogy articulates why that just isn’t true. What the original iPhone did wasn’t all that new, but how the iPhone did it fundamentally changed not just a market but people’s behavior. This is exactly what we seek to achieve with this new concept. Though the domains of warfare (air, land, sea, space and cyberspace) are not new, how the U.S. armed forces will rapidly and continuously integrate them in the future is new.

Another critique is that this is an Army-only concept. However, the Air Force and Marine Corps have been part of MDB from the start, and recent reporting from many forums has made clear the Army’s desire to listen, learn and include our joint and multinational partners in this idea’s development. Recently the Navy and the Joint Staff have also joined the discussion.

Albert Palazzo’s series of articles in Fall 2017 laid out a clear argument. To be successful, MDB must translate into radical effects on the U.S. military’s culture. The concept must force us to reconsider fundamental tenets like our industrial-age means of promoting, training and educating leaders. It must also pull us from the comfort of our tactical-level trenches to develop capabilities that inform up to the strategic level of war. Putting “battle” into the name both confines the possibilities and limits the result.

In battles, combatants can win time and space and they allow one side to take ground, but they do not win wars. The world we operate in today is not defined by battles but by persistent competition that cycles through varying rates in and out of armed conflict. Winning in competition is not accomplished by winning battles, but through executing integrated operations and campaigning. Operations are more encompassing, bringing together varied tactical actions with a common purpose or unifying themes. They are the bridge between the tactical and the strategic.

In my first months of command at Training and Doctrine Command, it became clear that the use of the word “battle” was stifling conversation and growth of the concept. There are three concrete reasons why MDB evolved to multi-domain operations (MDO).

First, if the concept is to be truly joint and multi-service, we need clarity and alignment in how we talk. The Air Force talks of MDO and multi-domain command and control, while we talk of MDB – often covering similar, if not the same, ideas and capabilities. To this point, none of the many people I have talked to, including my predecessor, are wedded to the use of “battle” – it was what fit best in time, place and circumstances. What they are committed to are the ideas of converging capabilities across the joint force with continuous integration across multiple domains.

Second, we cannot do this alone. The armed services can win battles and campaigns, but winning wars takes the whole of government. It helps the entire effort if our interagency partners are comfortable with and conversant in our warfighting concepts and doctrine. As highlighted to me by a former ambassador at a recent forum, talking in terms of operations instead of battles brings together those who want to get things done – whether they are civilians or the military.

And third, it is never just about the fight. When it comes to combat, there is no one better than the combined weight of the U.S. military and our allies and partners. However, the operating environment is evolving and nation-state-level competition has re-emerged, as evident by recent actions by both Russia and China. Our national defense strategy highlights the importance of winning the “competition” that precedes and follows conflict. However, our use of *multi-domain battle* seemed to indicate our concept was only for the conflict phase. While there are battles within competition, winning them is pointless if they are in isolation to the larger context of deliberate operations supporting national strategy.

“MDB” served its purpose – it sparked thinking and debate, and it created a foundation. But what we need now is “MDO,” and the next revision of the concept to be released this fall will reflect this change.

Language is important. It conveys meaning. This change is not cosmetic – it is about growing an idea to its greatest potential to change the way we fight today and to ensure overmatch against our adversaries of tomorrow. To do this, we need clarity and alignment across the joint force, whole-of-government inclusion and perspective that reinforces our need to compete effectively outside periods of armed conflict. Changing the name does not do this by itself, but it communicates a clear vision of what we need to accomplish and where we are headed.

GEN Stephen Townsend commands U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, Fort Eustis, VA. Previous assignments include commander, XVIII Airborne Corps, plus service with 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 21st Infantry Regiment, 31st Infantry Regiment, 75th Ranger Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, 7th Infantry Division (Light), 10th Mountain Division (Light), 2nd Infantry Division and 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). His key staff assignments include service as a planner and operations officer at battalion, brigade, division and joint-task-force levels. At U.S. Pacific Command, he was the J-5 strategy and plans officer for China and later served as special assistant to the commander. At U.S. Central Command, he was the executive officer to the commander. On the Joint Staff, he was the director of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Coordination Cell. GEN Townsend’s combat and operational experience includes Operation Urgent Fury, Grenada; Operation Just Cause, Panama; and Operation Uphold Democracy, Haiti. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, he led 3-2 Stryker Brigade, Task Force Arrowhead, on offensive operations across Iraq during “the surge.” He served four tours in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom, culminating as commander, 10th Mountain Division (Light). Most recently, GEN Townsend led all U.S. and multi-national troops fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as commander, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve. GEN Townsend holds a bachelor’s degree, two master’s degrees, the Air Assault Badge, the Master Parachutist Badge, the Ranger Tab, the Combat Action Badge and the Combat Infantryman’s Badge with star.

Acronym Quick-Scan

MDB – multi-domain battle

MDO – multi-domain operations



Figure 1. U.S. Army and British Army paratroopers shake hands before jumping from a C-17 Globemaster III over Latvia during Exercise Swift Response 18 June 8, 2018. (Photo by A1C Gracie I. Lee, U.S. Air Force)